

SAINTS, SINNERS AND THE GATES OF HELL
November 11, 1979
Matthew 16:13-20

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The problem in preaching about the church is not finding resources and references but choosing among the literally thousands available. Mostly the references are negative, critical of the church, particularly those written since the Second World War. Titles like The Comfortable Pew, God's Frozen People, The Noise of Silent Assenters, The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine, indicate the general position on the Church of those who write and sell books about it. Jewish philosophers like Richard Rubenstein have had trouble believing in the God of Israel "After Auschwitz". Thoughtful Christians have had similar trouble with the institutional church. It is a pain in the neck, frankly, to many theologians. It is too big to ignore and yet there is not much about it the academic community likes.

Some people find it quite possible to ignore the church. Even those who are in it and loyal to it can be sharply critical. The church is a little like Noah's Ark, someone said. If it weren't for the storm outside you couldn't stand the smell inside.

Ambiguous feelings about the church run through a T.S.Eliot poem called "The Rock". Listen to a few lines:

"I journeyed to London, to the timekept city,
Where the River flows, with foreign flotations.
There I was told: we have too many churches,
And too few chop-houses. There I was told:
Let the vicars retire. Men do not need the church
In the place where they work, but where they
spend their Sundays.
In the city, we need no bells:
Let them waken the suburbs.
I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:
We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor
To Hindhead or Maidenhead.
If the weather is foul we stay home and read the papers
In industrial districts, there I was told
Of economic Laws.
In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed
That the country now is only fit for picnics.
And the church does not seem to be wanted
In country or in suburb; and in the town
Only for important weddings." (Choruses from The Rock, I, Collected Poems of T.S.Eliot, p.179).

What are the reasons? Why does no one from critical professor to uncaring workingman, want the church? Eliot answered: in a way I think is deceptively accurate:

"Why should men love the Church?...
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts." (Ibid, p.196).

But that's Great Britain. Everyone knows that the Church of England is in trouble. How about the church in America? The church seems alive and vital here. Surely people believe in and have confidence in it. Certainly things are different

here. Or are they? Robert McAfee Brown suggests that we discover the answer by taking a little True/False Quiz. You may want to mark your answers on your bulletin or at least make a mental note of them. True or False -

1. There is a God...
2. God is concerned about people...
3. God is creator, judge and redeemer...
4. God is revealed in Jesus Christ...
5. God demands obedience...
6. One who believes these things must be active in the church...

Brown suggests that almost everyone in the United States would respond with an unconditional "true" to the first five assertions, but that at number six, the protests would begin. He suggests that the great American heresy is in separating believing from belonging.

Ganse Little, former pastor of this church, in his fine little volume, Beliefs That Matter, begins his chapter on the church with an illustration familiar to every minister. He remembers that every year it was his custom to ask the members of the Junior High School Confirmation Class if it is necessary for a follower of Jesus Christ to be a church member. And every year, most of them answered "no". (p.91). In that book is really a series of sermons he preached here in 1951 and 1952, those Junior Highs are Broadstreeters, some of whom are probably here this morning, still believing that followers of Jesus don't have to belong to the church.

It is not an unusual position. In fact, most Protestants hold it. It has not occurred to us that Christianity and belonging to the church means the same thing. That's what the Catholics believe, we think, - or used to believe. But not us. "Christian" is a word to describe a person who believes in a supreme being, pays his bills on time, supports the PTA, and gives to the United Way. "Church member" describes the person who can't support the PTA because he or she is at a committee meeting. That they might be one and the same thing: that belonging to something is the way you believe in something is a connection most of us have not made.

Let's look for a moment at the Biblical record. The word "church" is found just three times in the Gospels, all three in Matthew, and twice in the passage which is our text this morning. They were near Caesarea and Jesus surprised His disciples by asking them what people were saying about Him. They reported that some were confusing Him with John the Baptist, while others thought He was a prophet like Elijah. He turned the question to them then which always strikes us as an odd thing to do. We assume that they knew exactly who He was when they made the decision to leave what they were doing to follow Him. Apparently that was not the case. In any event, Peter spoke for them. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." That was not common knowledge. They did not refer to Him as Christ at all. It was such an unusual thing for Peter to say that Jesus attributed it to divine inspiration. And then He said something which is both very important and little understood. "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death (gates of Hell) will not prevail against it."

Did He mean that? Some scholars are so astounded by that statement that they conclude that He couldn't possibly have said it; that it was added to the narrative by the author who is obviously a friend of Peter's and wanted to solidify his position in the early Church. If He said it, and intended it, what did He mean?

Old St. John's by the Gas Station? The United Presbyterian Church? The Vatican? The Church in the Wildwood? What Church?

For centuries, in fact until recently, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters knew the answer. Jesus founded the only church there was, gave His authority to Peter, who in time passed it on to his apostolic successors who sit as Bishop of Rome. Protestants were so upset by the Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16 that we preferred to ignore the passage and the whole question of the church. We have only recently begun to retreat from our adversary positions. Dialogue and integrity become possible when Protestants can affirm that Jesus did, indeed, found a church on Peter and that he was, indeed, a Rock; and when Roman Catholics can affirm that while Jesus said quite a bit about Peter He did not, in fact, suggest that the authority may be passed on to the Bishop of Rome or anybody else for that matter.

The important things about the passage - which we miss while defending the Protestant - or Catholic position - are that the affirmation about Jesus being the Christ was related to the church, and that Peter - the Saint who first saw the truth about Jesus had the courage to risk saying it,...Peter, the Saint, was very shortly seen to be a sinner as well. He couldn't deal with the suffering part of the affirmation. And the same man elevated to Sainthood by the words of Jesus was humiliated almost in the same breath. "Get behind me, Satan!"

Well, why not Jesus without the church? What's wrong with appreciating the winsome life of the carpenter from Nazareth and the values He embodied? What's wrong with simply reading His teachings and, to the best of one's ability, following them? What's wrong with believing without belonging?

What's wrong with it, in the first place, is that Jesus wouldn't have known what we were talking about. The only God He knew about was the God who promised to turn the children of Abraham into a nation: a God who rescued a pathetic band of slaves from Egypt and molded them into that nation, a God whose identity was known to them - not in nature like the Canaanites, or the river like the Egyptians, but in the Covenant, the agreement between himself and them corporately. He was a God who didn't have much to do with them individually, but only as community, family, nation.

What's wrong with the incipient individualism of most American piety is that Jesus called people into a new community. American piety may favor the one to one emphasis of "My God and I" and "I walked in the Garden Alone" but the New Testament is interested in a new humanity, a corporate community of faith. When you came to Jesus you became part of the family. It was always that way. To believe in Him meant joining up with the company of the committed.

What's wrong with it, in the second place, is that it doesn't work. I have encountered some marvelous exceptions to the rule, but mostly I haven't seen dynamic, creative, life affirming faith apart from the church. Ideas don't survive for long unattached. Ideas can be mutilated by the institutions they spawn, but they die without them. One of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, was addressing graduating seminary students last June when he said, "Passion is all very well. It is all very well to fall in love. But passion must be grounded, or like lightning without a lightning rod it can blow fuses and burn the house down. Passion must be related not just to the world inside your skin where it is born but to the world outside your skin where it has to learn to walk and talk and act...Passion must be harnessed and put to work." (Outlook, 9/17/79).

The United States of America was an abstraction until some farmers got their guns and harnessed their passion for liberty. The church of Jesus Christ, the community of His followers, is the way people down through the centuries have harnessed their love for God and affirmed their faith and expressed their Christianity. That does not, by the way, suggest that the church is perfect. In fact, it is not. In fact, Peter was both saint and sinner. In fact, it is full of hypocrites, the big difference being that in the church we openly acknowledge that fact. There is plenty wrong with the church. People who belong to it and love it know that better than anyone else.

One of the most articulate of the church's loving critics is the Englishman, Colin Morris. He writes: "One reason why the world regards us as irrelevant and introverted is because of our morbid obsession with the state of the church. Not only are we prone to judge the proximity of the Kingdom of God by our membership statistics - when we grow, it is at hand; when we are in decline, it tarries. But more seriously, we use the church as a thermometer by which to measure the state of God's health. ...To put it crudely, there are sincere churchfolk who appear quite convinced that should the last Methodist expire, God will disappear in a puff of purple smoke." (Bugles in the Afternoon, p.69).

What's wrong with the church, in my mind, is just this. We have become defensive, scared, tentative, hesitant. We have begun to fear for our existence: declining statistics somehow seem like the announcement of God's demise. We have, therefore, begun too much to consolidate, pull back, cut down and prepare for a long siege. It is epidemic across Presbyterianism. My complaint about the church is not that it has said or done wrong things, but that most of the time it seems to be talking about, and to, itself. My concern is that we keep generating more enthusiasm for balance sheets than discipleship; that we seem to care more about institutional security than about faithfulness to Jesus Christ. My concern is that we have forgotten what He said to Peter about what must have looked like a very shaky proposition - "The gates of Hell will not prevail against it."

Well, they haven't - and - I believe - they will not. Oh, Broad Street Presbyterian Church may wax and wane: but, I believe, not so long as there is a job for it to do and it remains willing to do it. The church in Great Britain may sag for a generation or two: the church in China may disappear for a decade or two. But it will not die. It cannot. I believe that. It has been woven into the human story from the very beginning: from Abraham to David to Peter and John and Paul and Augustine, from Aquinas to Luther, Calvin, Wesley: from Bonhoeffer to Barth, King, Coffin, and Father Hesburgh, banging away at the dull conscience of a world so worried about the price of gas it can't see another holocaust. John Paul II with his profound simplicity celebrating mass was announcing the words of Jesus without ever saying them: "the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."

That's what you are involved in when you tie up with the church; something which is as much a part of God's creation as the sun and moon. It is also very personal, very immediate. It is also a particular congregation full of part time saints - and part time sinners - who can be hypocritical, exclusive, narrow, lazy and selfish - which is to say human. But that isn't the whole story. In fact, it's not even a very important part of the story.

I live with the church, day in, day out, year in, year out.

Instead of hypocrisy, I keep encountering people who attend worship because it's something they want to do, in all kinds of weather, in all sorts of settings. I keep finding people who read books and join discussion groups and attend classes and wrestle with tough questions with great integrity.

Instead of exclusiveness, I would suggest that the church is the one place, perhaps the only place, where everyone is, in fact, welcome; where everyone of society's outcasts will receive attention and love and help.

Instead of narrowness, I find people who are willing to innovate, people who love their traditions but with a little grumbling, will try new ideas.

Instead of laziness, I keep discovering people who attend boring meetings and do routine, sometimes unpleasant tasks; people who will spend evenings in workshops and weekends at retreats because they want the church to be strong.

And instead of selfishness, I have concluded that members of the church are the most generous, genuinely helpful people in the world. They will, I know, help when help is needed. They will respond to hungry people; they will, when asked, clothe the naked and heal the sick. I have been associated with three churches - each one of which gave away clothes, blankets, food and money in response to every need it encountered. Instead of selfishness I see church members volunteering to do the things our society must have done.

And instead of alienation, I have seen members of the church close ranks and love one another when one of them is hurting. I have seen and been blessed by the family of God's people. (See Give the Priest a Chance, Emily Preston, A.D. Magazine July/August, 1979, p.22-23).

Before we leave this morning, we will be presenting our pledges for the program of this church in 1980. Sometimes we regard the exercise as little more than a necessary evil. My hope is that it might be more than that for you this morning. Instead, may it be the occasion of an expansive new vision of your place in God's company of faithful people. May it be a new and strong affirmation of faith in God, in Jesus Christ - and in His church - against which the gates of Hell will not prevail.

Amen.

O God our Father, we are grateful for your holy catholic church and for this congregation. Renew our trust in you - and in one another. Give us a new vision of the work you have for us to do; You have provided the resources, now give us faith and courage to do it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.